

# Books set the stage for theater

■ **Children's arts education program 'Making Books Sing' turns novels into plays, musicals and operas**

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As founder and artistic director of the groundbreaking Off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre, Barbara Zinn Krieger has enjoyed her share of success.

For more than two decades, Krieger was at the helm of the celebrated company near Union Square that produced scores of cutting-edge dramas including two Pulitzer Prize winners, Edward Albee's "Three Tall Women" (1994) and Paula Vogel's "How I learned to Drive" (1998).

So three years ago, she stepped down from that post to dedicate herself full-time to "Making Books Sing," a children's theater and arts education program she started in 1996.

"The Vineyard was 22 years old; it was all grown up," Krieger said last week from the organization's office across from the United Nations. "I felt the new baby needed me."

Krieger has brought the same passion and enthusiasm for theater to her current role as artistic director of Making Books Sing, an organization that turns contemporary children's books into fully realized plays, musicals and operas.

"If we don't serve the next generation with quality theater, we will not have an audience tomorrow," said Krieger, who lives in Midtown and is a grandmother of two who looks far younger than her 69 years. "That is what we are trying to do. The same quality work for adults, we are doing for children."

So far there have been nine productions — one for each year of the program — that have entertained 10,000 school children a year throughout the city. Along with making professional theater available to young audiences, the organization offers literacy-based education programs for students, teachers and families.

This year's production, which opens Thursday, is a mu-



Playwright Myla Churchill, left, collaborates in Manhattan with Barbara Zinn Krieger, artistic director at Making Books Sing.

sical adaptation based on Deborah Hopkinson's book "A Band of Angels." It tells the story of the Jubilee Singers, a choir of freed slaves, originally known as the Colored Christian Choir, that formed in 1867.

The group of nine singers, along with their music teacher and founder, George White, went on an historic fund-raising tour to help the fledgling Fisk Free Colored School in Nashville, later renamed Fisk University.

"A Band of Angels" is fiction but is based on true events. Hopkinson tells the story through the eyes of Ella, based on the real-life Ella Sheppard Moore, who was born the daughter of a slave and a freed slave in 1851. She arrived at the Fisk School in 1868 with a few dollars in her pocket and a rich musical talent. By age 17 Ella became the first black teacher at the Fisk School and was the pianist for the choir.

The production features a professional, all-equity member cast as well as a rousing score of spirituals.

The book was adapted for the stage by playwright Myla Churchill, who recognized it as a powerful tale that would make inspiring children's theater.

"This is an important story that shows the tenacity of these people in their quest for knowledge," said Churchill, who has written for a number of children's programs and is associate professor of play-writing at New York University.

"We live in a time when edu-

cation is not a priority. "No Child Left Behind" is an assault on our educational system, and our kids are failing," said Churchill, who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant and is married with two children.

"Even though knowledge was being kept from them, the Fisk Jubilee Singers desire to learn remained so strong. We need to understand that knowledge is our birthright and will help you do anything you want to do in this world."

Churchill said sugarcoating history, no matter how ugly the subject, is pointless.

"Slavery was such a dark part of our history that nobody — black or white — wants to talk about it," she said. "But unless we address it, and look at our past, we are unable to move forward."

There is a poignant lesson to the story, too.

"The Jubilee Singers went on this tour to raise money for their school, but not one of them ever got the chance to graduate," Churchill added. "They thought it was more important for the institution to survive so others could learn. That might be the ultimate sacrifice."

"A Band of Angels" will be presented at York College Performing Arts Center on Feb. 10 and 11 at 10:30 a.m. and on Feb. 12 at 2:00 p.m.

It also will play at Goldstein Theatre Kingsborough Community College on Feb. 14-18 at 10:30 a.m. For more information, call 212-573-8791 ext. 245 or go to [makingbookssing.org](http://makingbookssing.org).